Lynch / Rivette. Wrest of the Night: “Lost Highway” and “Duelle”

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Comparing a film by David Lynch with one by Jacques Rivette, paired by a new retrospective series in New York.

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This article accompanies the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s dual retrospective of the films of Jacques Rivette and David Lynch and is part of an ongoing review of Rivette’s films for the Notebook*, in light of several major re-releases of his work.*



Lost Highway and *Duelle*: two post-surrealist reformulations of *noir* potboilers and '40s programmers. In both, a nymph-like blond battles a raven-haired cipher for spiritual, epistemological, and moral dominance, leading side-characters to their deaths in the progress. A protagonist, impossibly in over his/her head, is caught in some ur-reality in which the whole world seems given over to high artifice. Parallel worlds, one by Jacques Rivette in 1976 and the other David Lynch twenty years later, where one might look on strange things unstrangely: prosaic twilight duels, as in Val Lewton films, are realised in impossibly mysterious, banal, expressionistic urban vistas. *Duelle* begins with a very Lynchian conceit: that the stable surface world of the film might be toppled by an image of imbalance right at the beginning. Like the peer under the dew-speckled grass blades in

Blue Velvet, Hermine Karagheuz' tiptoeing atop an exercise ball in the first moments of *Duelle* seems to twist the movie inside out; Paris, from then on—its denizens glimpsed only fleetingly in the backgrounds of parks and filing uniformly, anonymously out of a betting hall—belongs to nobody. Sunlight, ushered in from the window by the crawl of an electric curtain, lights up the face of Bill Pullman's Fred Madison in the first image of *Lost Highway*. His door buzzer rings, and the extended fantasy of the film—the musclecar-porn-sex-violence invention of a wife-murderer reeling from his own perpetual impotence —begins to engulf any notion we might have of a stable sense of reality. The bifurcated structure pits the nightmarishly opaque opening 45 minutes—jazz musician Pullman and his wife (Patricia Arquette) terrorised by an unknown force videotaping their home, their private lives—against another piece of intrigue involving a young mechanic (Balthazar Getty) in love with a mobster's moll (also Arquette). Eventually, as in *Mulholland Dr.* and *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (coming later in this series), the distinctions between the two halves collapse and either side, each with its particular mix of genres and genre tropes, seeps into the business of the other.

Both directors could be accused, have been accused, in these two cryptically beautiful movies, of conjuring the rabbit of content—conspiracies, shifting identities, character motivation—out the magician's hat of style. As both movies never depict a *reality* as such, only an obverse, fantastical simulacrum of it, the fairy-tale, for all its kitsch, its weirdness, its unassailability, is our only real reference point. Yet Rivette films even the *Tekken*-like battles of the Queen of the Sun and the Queen of the Moon with the same feel for gravity he would bring to everything from Balzac to Joan of Arc to *Wuthering Heights*; his characters' gestures—the strained, steady extension of a leg, the outsize hand gesturing a curse in violet satin glove—might seem at any moment both trite and absolutely true in their physical grace. Conversely, *Lost Highway* seems to exist almost entirely in widescreen close-ups and point-of-view shots; its characters, expressions tightly framed, swimming in shallow focus, ascribed merely selective portions of the noises of their environments, are fixed in place, only able to stiffly observe what is unfolding in front of them. Pullman's character says that he "hates cameras," and prefers to remember things *as* he remembers them, with all the distortion that might come with it. Yet his only *memory* of murdering his wife in impotent rage is *through* the images of a camcorder—he watches it on TV, then wakes up jail having lived it. The movie's final images—at the wheel of a car, police in pursuit, shapeshifting violently into an unknowable, superimposed blend of his two personas—stand in stark contrast to *Duelle*'s vision of an empty park and the Straubian grounding effect of traffic noises returning to the soundtrack as the action vanishes. Where in *Lost Highway* the hero wakes from a dream and, as in *Inland Empire*, continues to act as if he hadn't, in *Duelle*, the heroine breaks the grip of the nightmare, feels the cold wind buffeting her face and shaking the leaves of the trees around her, and, after a pause, whispers the same arcane codes and clutches the same totemic gimcrack

as if in the hope that she might summon the whole fantasy back again.